

ISSUE 78 SPRING 2015

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You wouldn't expect five days in a retreat like this to have much effect. But in the "counterclockwise" study, which Langer conducted in 1981 and named after the way it seemed to reverse the effects of time, the results were remarkable. At the end of the retreat, members of the group showed demonstrable improvement, on average, in objective tests of memory, height, weight gain, posture, vision, and hearing. They even looked noticeably younger.

To Langer, most people are much more capable than they think they are. The way they think holds back their capabilities. But when a context forces people out of their ingrained, self-imposed limits ("I am old"), it makes them mindful. They have to approach the world freshly, with a beginner's mind, in a way that has an enormous positive effect. Langer, who is 67 and the first woman to gain tenure in Harvard's psychology department, has conducted dozens of studies of changed context—involving such diverse situations as aging, recovery from disease, individual creativity, organizational innovation, the management of disabilities, and addiction. And they all share a theme: Cultivated mindfulness can change your life.

Suppose you're confined to a nursing home. You're elderly, you've lost much of your mobility, and your faculties are deteriorating. Along comes a Harvard University social psychology professor named Ellen Langer who takes you away on a retreat, where everything is transformed into the way it looked and felt when you were 25. Radios with vacuum tubes play rockabilly and Perry Como, a hardcover copy of Ian Fleming's *Goldfinger* sits on a Danish modern coffee table (the movie won't be released

for several years yet), the clothing is au courant for 1959, and the conversation covers recent events like Fidel Castro's invasion of Havana. The staff treat you like you're in the prime of physical health, making you carry your own suitcases upstairs even if you haven't recently lifted anything nearly that heavy. You know, at some level, that this is all a fictional re-creation. But as it comes alive around you, you find yourself paying attention to your environment in ways you haven't done in years.

As many business leaders know, mindfulness is gathering momentum as a management practice. Conferences such as Wisdom 2.0, and companies such as Google, are making a clear case that more deliberate awareness leads to stronger performance and better decision making. Often, this improvement is linked to meditation practice. But other forms of mindfulness are also prominent in the business world today, including the simple concept of

the right frame of mind, are sources of opportunity.

Langer recently spoke with *strategy+business* in her office in Cambridge, Mass., about the theory and practice of mindfulness in business. The occasion was the new 25th-anniversary edition of her first book on the subject: *Mindfulness* (Da Capo Press, 2014). In both her classroom and her consultations, Langer is known for her cheerfully blunt insistence on two basic premises: First,

Through mindful interventions, they can be reversed.

One of the basic principles of social psychology is that behavior is context-dependent. This runs counter to the personality theory that people associate with psychology, which says that everything you do is a function of who you are inside, and if you change your personality, you can change your life. In social psychology, you're not the master of your fate. The context is the master.

So if you want to gain real control over your life, the first step is to ask who controls the context. Then find ways to generate the kind of context that will help you do the things you want to do. By being aware of the context, and making more mindful choices about it, you can become the master of your fate even in a context-dependent world.

In the counterclockwise study, we improved memory and strength. That was good. But the most exciting aspect was that we improved people's vision and hearing. If you ask most people, "Can eyesight improve?" they say no. When you show them it can, their minds open up to other possibilities.

We've done other studies of eyesight improvement. In one study we reversed the Snellen eye chart. This is the familiar eye chart in every optometrist's office, where the letters get smaller as you look down. But we made the letters get progressively larger. This sent the message that "you will find it easier to see as you go along." People could see what they couldn't see before. By changing people's expectations of what they would see, we improved their vision.

S+B: Does it help to draw the patient's attention to the fact that you reversed the type sizes?

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"being here now"—holding an open frame of mind, avoiding the complacent arrogance that comes from the "illusion of certainty," as Langer calls it. In his October 2014 profile of Langer for the *New York Times Magazine*, writer Bruce Grierson described her form of mindfulness as "noticing moment-to-moment changes around you, from the differences in the face of your spouse across the breakfast table to the variability of your asthma symptoms."

This approach runs counter, of course, to the highly focused, take-no-prisoners approach to leadership prevalent in many companies today. The executive's attention is supposed to be streamlined and free of distractions so that he or she can pay attention only to what is important. But in practice, that means tackling most problems as rapidly and mindlessly as possible, just to get them out of the way. Langer argues that distractions, when approached with

inattention is the source of most (or all) problems faced by the world's leaders today. Second, an organization that provides a context that enables people to be mindful on the job will reap the benefits of innovation and effectiveness.

S+B: The counterclockwise study is a remarkable story. But that anachronistic world lasted for only a week. Then they all returned to the real world. What is this story really telling us?

LANGER: The purpose of that experiment was not to set up an artificial environment and show how it influenced behavior. The major point is the power of possibility. The people in the experiment cured themselves; we just provided a placebo, a catalyst for change. In other words, all the limits that people assume to be real—limits on vitality, creativity, innovation, and even health—are often of our own mak-

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LANGER: Yes, it does. The essence of being mindful is noticing change. The Snellen eye chart is supposed to provide an absolute measurement of your vision—a number like 20/40. But you're in an artificial, high-stress environment, looking at a card with tiny type. It's bizarre to think that number would be the same the next morning, when you're driving around hungry looking for a restaurant. If you're aware of these differences, your vision can improve.

We see the same thing in recovery from illness. When people are told they have a chronic illness, they assume the diagnosis is absolute. They stop paying attention to their own symptoms. If they were conditioned to pay attention, they'd notice that the symptoms vary. Sometimes they're greater, sometimes they're less, sometimes they don't even exist. Then they could start to ask, "Why are these differences occurring?" Even if you don't find the answer, the research we've done on mindfulness over the years shows that just paying attention to variability is good for your health.

My life's work is to make the link between the way you pay attention and your vitality more obvious. You don't need a pill to improve;

you can improve by changing the way you view your circumstances. For instance, we have studied the relationship between people's stereotypes of themselves and their performance. In one experiment, we tested a group of Asian women in math. The research consistently shows that if they are primed for their gender—given cues that remind them that they're women—they don't do as well as when the experiment draws their attention to the fact that they're Asian. The test itself is the same. There are similar findings for every race, even for stereotypes that they consciously and rightfully reject. Black men score much higher on the same test when they are told it's a test of athletic ability than when they're told it's a test of intellect. All of us are mindlessly prone to believe stereotypes of ourselves unless we question them.

Embracing Mistakes

S+B: How does this apply to business?

LANGER: In business, there is a tendency to seek absolutes. They can be metrics, like the Snellen eye chart, or prejudices, or any other accepted perspective. The leader's main job should

not be to provide a script, but to provoke the mindfulness of everyone in the company. For example, innovation depends on the ability to recognize and recontextualize failures. That's what 3M did with the Post-it note: A glue that failed to adhere became one of its greatest successes.

Gabriel Hammond [founder/CEO of the SteelPath investment advisory firm] and I conducted a study of failed products. We asked participants questions like, "What would you do with a substance that adhered for only a short amount of time?" Would they give up and go on to the next product, or would they reframe it into something useful?

To think this way, you have to be willing to put things in a new context. In *Mindfulness*, I pose a puzzle to the reader: At 3 o'clock in the morning, your doorbell rings. It's a man driving a Rolls-Royce and wearing a sable coat. He says, "I'm in a scavenger hunt. My ex-wife is in it too. It's important to me that I beat her. I need a piece of wood about 3 feet by 7 feet. I'll give you \$60,000 for it." Now where will you find this piece of wood at that hour? You can't think of anything, so you say you're sorry. He leaves, and you go back to sleep.

The next day, you realize you could have taken your closet door off the hinges and given it to him. But it didn't occur to you to think that way. Most products and services have that quality. The use to which we put them is only one of several potential uses.

S+B: How do you encourage people to think this way?

LANGER: You put them in a context that rewards a mindful approach to failure. For example, I've consulted

someone get away with breaking the rule...

LANGER: They're afraid everyone will want to do it. They know that will lead to someone making a mistake, and they don't want to have to police everyone.

But underneath that ruling is a type of company so worried about making mistakes that it gives up opportunities for innovation. Every decision, by definition, involves uncertainty. How do we design this car? Where do we drill for oil? How

S+B: So the answer is to eliminate penalties for mistakes?

LANGER: The answer is to recognize that if something problematic happens only once in a while, it's no big deal. And if it happens all the time, there is probably a business opportunity somewhere nearby. It's all in the way you frame the mistake. You get an absolute and you get it wrong—a crisis, right? If you have a "maybe" and you get it wrong, it's not so terrible.

We conducted a study of the value of mistakes. We asked a group of volunteers to come in at the start of the day. We asked them what they had eaten for breakfast, and told them they would contribute to a research project about the subject of "morning," either by drawing a picture or writing an essay. Then we divided them into three groups. The first group completed the assignment without further instructions. We stopped the second group halfway through to give them a printout that, we said, would help further them along. But the printout spelled it "mourning," not "morning"—making it clear they should have been thinking about a funeral instead of a sunrise. These groups realized they had made a mistake, started over, and rushed their way through to catch up.

S+B: Just as many groups in business do when the specs change.

LANGER: Exactly. The third group was told at the outset that if they made a mistake, they shouldn't start over. Instead, they should incorpo-

"The type of company so worried about making mistakes gives up opportunities for innovation."

to several nursing homes. I was once in a director's office and the nurse came in complaining that one of the residents didn't want to go down to the dining hall. She wanted to stay in her room and have peanut butter. They saw this as a failure and began debating how to fix it. I asked, "What's wrong with letting her stay in?" The nurse said, "Well, what if everyone wanted to do that?"

First of all, they'd save lots of money in the short run. In the long run, it would help them figure out how to change the food service so people would want to come down to dinner.

S+B: Many organizations have a hard time with exceptions. If they let

much should I allot for production? At the moment the decision is announced, though, we act as if it was handed down from the heavens, so that a deviation from it is heresy rather than an opportunity.

Then we compound the problem with selective enforcement. A lot of rules don't exist for the manifest reason. Speed limits, for example, don't really regulate speed. The authorities use them to pull over who they want to pull over, often for a variety of reasons. Most company rules are like that. The companies know most people are breaking the rule. Why do they keep it in the first place? So it's there when they want it, to target the people they want to target for other reasons.

rate their ideas into the final piece of work. Then, when we stopped them halfway through with the new print-out about “mourning,” they did exactly that. They worked their old material about daylight into their new work on grieving.

Then we shuffled the essays and drawings together and had a separate group evaluate their quality. The third group’s products were consistently [seen as] superior to the others, including those from the group that didn’t make mistakes. That’s because the third group was mindful of what they were doing. They were primed to see their mistakes as opportunities.

Mistakes are good things. They are signals that you’re doing something mindlessly, and if you pay attention, you’ll find an opportunity. Suppose you’re producing car seats and all of a sudden you find that the armrest is built wrong. It was supposed to be straight, and instead, it’s curved. Before you throw it away, think: What are the advantages of it being curved? Well, maybe it can serve as a tray, or add safety, or increase comfort. You don’t get to that way of thinking when you presume that the decision—any decision—means you’ve found the very best way of doing things.

Mindfulness is very powerful. When we’re mindful, noticing more things, it’s literally and figuratively enlivening. In a work situation that encourages mindfulness, we enjoy being there, we are healthier, it costs less, and there are fewer accidents.

Research shows that when we’re mindful, paying more direct attention to the people around us, we’re seen as more charismatic. We’re able to avert dangers and spot opportunities. We don’t fall into potholes. And the things we produce seem to bear the imprint of our mindfulness. They are better.

A Context for Mindfulness

S+B: If you’re a leader, how do you set a tone for this kind of approach?

LANGER: You cultivate the ability to notice things around you. Noticing new things, in general, puts you in the present. That makes you more sensitive to context. Most important, it shows you that you didn’t know that thing you thought you knew, which makes everything new to you again.

In business, there are a lot of automatic mind-sets that dictate what people do. You set an example by not approaching those in a mindless way. For example, many companies struggle with work–life balance. People assume they should act one way at work and another way at home. But that type of work–life balance is mindless. Sure, it’s better than work–life *imbalance*. But better still is work–life integration. People should be the same person wherever they are, bringing the same talents to bear at home and work.

Most people know that when they’re at work, they’re not as authentic. They’re oriented to outcomes. When they’re at home, they

have more concern about relationships. They pay more attention. They take time to play. If they brought those qualities to work, they’d be less stressed and more capable. But to do that, they’d need to exercise more control over their activity. I bring my dog to work every day because she’s old and needs care. When she needs attention, I have to be able to stop work for a minute. As a leader, if I’m granting myself that kind of freedom, then others should have the same.

S+B: But not every organization provides that kind of context.

LANGER: That’s because people at the top of the hierarchy tend to assume that people at the lower levels don’t know much. But that turns out to be incorrect. When you level the hierarchy a bit, and everyone is mindful and encouraged to do their own thing, you end up with superior coordinated activity. Not chaos. Employees feel cared for, valued.

The leaders have to recognize that everything people do makes sense from their perspective, and that everyone can provide value in the right context. Someone who seems rigid is actually someone you can count on, somebody stable. If she seems impulsive, she’s spontaneous. If he seems gullible, he also promotes trust and candor.

If you’re a leader, once you recognize this, not only do you end up with more respect for people, but you see how they add value. Then if you value them more, they’ll work

harder and enjoy it more. They'll need fewer days off, there will be fewer accidents, healthcare costs will come down. And your company will make more money.

One basic principle is to notice the things that people at other levels notice. The rule I used in evaluating the effectiveness of nursing homes was to ask myself, "Could I stay here myself?" If the answer was "No way," I'd ask myself why. Maybe it smelled. Maybe the doors to the apartments were kept open, so there was no privacy. Maybe the staff were in uniforms, which put them at a distance from the residents. That didn't feel good.

I used a similar rule when I talked to the managers of a large company with a call center. They have a thousand people receiving calls, all with a script. I said, "Would you handle 20 of these calls in a row yourself? Let's do it right now." They wouldn't do it. The scripts are too boring.

But nobody at the call center is allowed to break the script. As a consumer, when I get a call asking for money, I always say the same thing, "If you break out of the script, I'll write you a check." But the callers can't do it, even with that incentive. It's bizarre. Sometimes you have to yell at a caller to stop the script so you can get off the phone.

I told the call center leaders, "Your employees, just like yourself, have talked on the phone all their lives. Nobody needs to be trained to use the phone. Give them a few general rules and let them talk as they would normally. They'll enjoy it." The data is very clear that when people on one end of a transaction act authentically, the people on the other end feel cared for. "Your company will come across as trustworthy," I said, "and you'll make the sale."

S+B: What did the call center leaders say?

LANGER: They said, "We'll try it tomorrow."

Companies without Stress

S+B: You have not yet mentioned meditation.

LANGER: Meditation is a tool. You can meditate to become mindful. But you can also achieve mindfulness without meditation. It's not better or worse; just a different way.

In meditation, you focus on a mantra or your breath, and when stray thoughts occur, you notice them and let them leave, no matter how they grip you or upset you. Sometimes that's hard; sometimes

ble to live a virtually stress-free life. It saddens me that people in industrial culture take stress as a baseline. They think that to be human is to be stressed. I don't think so.

S+B: Are businesspeople more sophisticated about mindfulness than they would have been, perhaps, in 1990?

LANGER: Are more people comfortable with being mindful in the face of uncertainty? I would like to think so, but I don't know. Many people confuse the stability of their mindsets with the stability of the underlying phenomenon. Everything is changing, but people act as if things are more certain than they actually are. We're taught this in school, and

"Work-life balance is mindless. Better is work-life integration."

it's easy. Then you return to the breath or the mantra. Over time, you come to see that it's just a thought, it's not real.

The approach I prefer is to take a thought coming in and look at it from different perspectives. How do you know it's true? When is it untrue? When is it an advantage? When is it a disadvantage?

For example, stress is a result of mindlessness. It's a result of a thought that something bad is going to happen. You can examine that thought. You can give yourself five reasons why this awful event might not occur. That immediately reduces the stress. Or you can explore the advantages it might bring along with the problems. If you continue to be mindful about your own thoughts, and direct them this way, it is possi-

ble to live a virtually stress-free life. Even learning a sport, like tennis, you're told, "Here's how you hold the racket; here's how you swing." None of these things are universally true; they apply only to certain players at certain times. But it's presented as true, and over time, this gives us the illusion that we know what's going on.

S+B: And that's a problem?

LANGER: When you think you know what's going on, you don't look. And when you don't look, you don't see. And if you don't look or see, you're not thriving.

For example, suppose I have a cookie on my desk, and I'm trying to figure out whether to offer it to you. I will make this decision, like all decisions, in the face of uncertainty. Maybe you're a diabetic.

Maybe you're trying to be healthy, and you're going to hate the person who offers it to you. Or maybe you'll respond well to it and become a bit more avuncular. Maybe the gesture will make us feel friendlier to each other, and make our interaction more informal and authentic. There's no way of knowing.

the decision goes wrong, you're aware of how to improve things without changing course. That's what successful companies do.

S+B: That level of mindfulness sounds exhausting.

LANGER: Mindfulness is energy-begetting, not energy-consuming.

“Rather than worrying about whether a decision is right, make the decision work.”

People who study decision making say you should gather information and then weigh the costs and the benefits. But there's no end of potentially relevant information and no way of knowing the limits of what you should consider. You might do a cost-benefit analysis. But the costs and the benefits are all in your head, not in the cookie itself. They incorporate your expectations and interpretations. The cookie's sugar, for instance, might be bad for your teeth. On the other hand, its sweetness is satisfying, which leads you to produce more ptyalin, which is actually good for your teeth.

So, the point is clear. Rather than worrying about whether a decision is right, make the decision work. Look at the advantages that accrue from whatever happens, and then play it as if it was the right decision all along. Pay close enough attention to what happens so that if

When you go on a trip, you're paying money to see new things. And it's exhilarating, right? It's not exhausting. Humor relies on mindfulness. I'll tell you a joke to illustrate: Did you hear about the three-foot-tall clairvoyant who escaped from prison? There's a small medium at large. That's funny only because you notice the double meaning in those words. Mindfulness makes it funny.

The only thing exhausting about mindfulness is the concern we have about it in the abstract. Oh my gosh, what if I don't have time to invest all this attention? Or what if I invest it and I still can't solve the problem? Or how am I supposed to invest all this attention in these boring events?

Events are neither innately exciting nor innately non-exciting. You can make a boring event engaging by noticing things about it. We studied this by taking groups of people

who professed [some] antipathy: people who hated football, rap music, or classical music. We had everyone watch a video they professed to hate, but we gave them instructions: Notice six things that were new to you. Then we asked them how they liked the video. The more they noticed, the more engaged they were—not the other way around.

If you're bored, make a distinction. It doesn't matter if that distinction is grand, grandiose, or petty; it has the same psychological effect on you. If you truly dislike what you're doing, then being mindful about it might show you a way to stop having to do it. If you hate doing the dishes, say to your spouse, “I'll do something else. I don't want to do this.”

S+B: Is it really feasible to design companies to promote this level of attention?

LANGER: Yes. The quality movement and Japanese management, for example, have a lot of methods that develop people's awareness of the processes around them. They are continuously engaged in improving the systems, paying attention to every detail, and making it better. That's just one example.

You don't have to set aside time for meditation. Depending on how you design them, written directions, physical environments, incentives, and practices can all either put people to sleep or wake them up. +

Reprint No. 00310

strategy+business magazine
is published by PwC Strategy& Inc.
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